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Memorializing Traumatic Death

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Editor's note: Over the next few issues, ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY will be featuring articles by anthropologists analysing memorials. In their editorial, Peter Jan Margry and Cristina Sánchez-Carretero open a debate on what they tentatively refer to as 'improvised' or 'spontaneous memorials' to traumatic deaths. This is complemented by a topical article in this issue by Sylvia Grider on the way the Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings have been memorialized.

The tragic death of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997 firmly placed improvised memorial sites or spontaneous shrines as a phenomenon on the world map. In the collective emotional outpouring that followed, memorial sites were erected all over the world with flowers, candles, letters, drawings, messages, stuffed animals and toys. These conveyed popular feelings about Diana, about the royal family and about the UK (Kear and Steinberg 1999, Walter 1999). From international media coverage of the immense sea of flowers and messages deposited at the entrance to Kensington Palace, and of public reactions to events, emerged a rich ritual and symbolic language (Connerton 1989). Beyond public memorialization of Princess Diana's death prompted by grief and sorrow, this was also very much a protest in support of the 'people's' princess, for whom initially no state funeral was planned (as reflected in Stephen Frears' recent film *The Queen*).

Similar behaviour was displayed in reaction to the untimely death of other beloved public personalities – for instance Elvis Presley in 1977 and Olof Palme in 1986, for whom large improvised memorials were also spontaneously created. However, it was not until after Princess Diana's death that public memorialization of death found an elaborate format with an enduring ritual form and symbolic repertoire. Similar patterns may be detected in subsequent memorialization of victims of violence, such as those of the 11 September and 11 March attacks in New York and Madrid, and memorial sites built in war zones. On a smaller and more local scale, there has also been a sharp increase in roadside memorials, part of a general boom in erecting monuments which Doss (forthcoming) refers to as 'memorial mania'.

* * *

Improvised memorials provide an arena where politicians and mass media intersect, but where neither controls or escapes public responses that are continuously incorporated into an ongoing process. Such memorials therefore make ideal subjects for case studies of how national (and international) memory is constructed in response to traumatic death within the overall context of a mourning ritual. The workshop 'Spontaneous shrines as political tools' at the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) meeting in Bristol in September 2006 focused on the hybrid quality of spontaneous shrines both as monuments of mourning and as focal points for protest and expression of discontent. Death sites are often marked in a manner that adds an element of reproach, allowing them to function temporarily as spaces for public rebuke.

Improvised memorials should be read as more than an expression of grief. They are performative events in public spaces that often trigger new actions in the social or political sphere. For instance, through events that took

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place around the memorials to the murdered Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, not only were leftist politicians subjected to public scrutiny, but the entire Dutch political system was challenged and rejected by a large part of the nation. Similar actions were triggered by the murder of anti-globalization demonstrator Carlo Giuliani, killed in Genoa in 2001, and the tragic death of 193 young people in a fire in the Cromagnon disco in Buenos Aires in 2004. These traumatic deaths were all followed by the gradual accretion of a mass of memorabilia at the sites where the deaths occurred. They were also followed by political demands and the promise of strong political support for particular causes. Even in roadside memorials, crosses placed at the site of a traffic accident are often also protests against drunk driving, traffic rule violations, or badly maintained roads.

Over the last decade, scholars have been conducting research on the collective ways we deal with untimely death (Grider 2000, 2001, Doss 2006, Haney et al. 1997, Fraenkel 2002, Santino 1992, 2006a, 2006b). Anthropologists, mainly from America and Europe, have attempted to draw up a conceptual framework for memorial sites, in which questions of typology and definition have come under discussion. Santino coined the term 'spontaneous shrines' for memorials to victims of political assassination in Northern Ireland (Santino 1992). This term has been widely used since, although some scholars would argue that the term 'shrine' is suggestive of worship at a religious or sacred site, pushing it into a religious context which need not always apply. Nevertheless, the term 'shrine' may appropriately be used as a descriptive noun to refer to some sites established to communicate with the deceased, and not just to commemorate or to memorialize them (Santino 2006). Santino uses the word 'spontaneous' to indicate their unofficial and undirected nature, by which he means that nobody, whether church, government or media, tells grievors how to construct these shrines or what objects should be placed there. These practices are not sanctioned by any institution, and citizens act, often very creatively, on their own account. In the United States the term 'makeshift memorial' is widespread, but 'makeshift' has pejorative connotations.

Spontaneous shrines or ephemeral memorial sites are obviously central to our political and social universe. As distinct from permanent memorials, often constructed much later, these are 'performative commemoratives' (Santino 2006) or 'performative memorials' (Margry forthcoming) that call for fresh theorizing. Although in the cases we studied, such sites were mostly erected to commemorate untimely death – terrorist attacks, car accidents, murders, fires – the deaths themselves need not necessarily be untimely to provoke massive offerings at the memorial site. However, these phenomena share the characteristic of being lived collectively as traumatic. For instance, the demise of Pope John Paul II was not unexpected, but nevertheless generated performative memorials all over the world. His death sparked a collective reaction, which is why we prefer the expression 'traumatic death'. In all cases, however, such traumatic deaths often trigger political (re)actions that may subsequently be remembered as marking a change of direction in history.

* * *

One common feature of the cases we researched is that citizens do not place memorabilia or offerings at memorial sites solely in memory of the deceased. Through their actions, they also send out messages asking for action: 'this should not have happened', 'somebody has to take responsibility', or simply 'a different world is possible'. These are indeed performances in the Austinian sense because, through the act of memorializing death in public, participants are asking for change (Alexander 2006), not only to commemorate or to protest, but to find an answer, to seek to understand what happened, or to ask someone

to take responsibility. However Erika Doss, in her analysis of spontaneous shrines in America, argues that in the American context for the most part these memorials 'fail to magnetize the social forces and political actions of democratic change' (Doss 2006: 315).

Whoever initiates temporary memorials is engaged in actively producing a meaningful narrative through symbolism. Evocative messages and drawings deposited at these sites elicit interactive responses in a dynamic process of making meaning. These often stir up strong emotions and stimulate intense debate among visitors. Through a process of accretion, memorials are in a perpetual process of change, which continuously elicits new conversations. Such interactions help integrate memorials with their surroundings. The performative nature of this memorial landscape, therefore, brings about a style of communication in which both the act of expression and the performer matter, and which proves very difficult for anyone having any dealings with either the location or the event to ignore. In this process, new meanings and narratives are generated.

There are plenty of local variations in commemoration. For example, there were noticeable variations between the 9/11 memorials in New York and the 11 March shrines in Madrid regarding use of key symbols such as national flags, which offer an interesting reading in terms of the process by which nation-states are reproduced. However, insofar as it is possible to generalize, case studies in Europe and the Americas suggest these memorials share many of the following characteristics: (1) bricolages or assemblages accumulate over time and interact in a performative way with the public and the media; (2) items deposited are partly offerings to the deceased, but are partly deposited with a specific message intended for an audience and for the media (and the mediatized audience); (3) memorials follow a visual rhetorical and narrative structure by means of which participants both create and convey meaning, whether intentionally or unintentionally; (4) improvised memorials may become part of a movement to reclaim a public space and neighbouring or other related buildings; (5) they are not sanctioned by any institution, hence they are unofficial and non-institutionalized and not easily subjected to control by authorities; (6) the sites are created in a personal way, and to a certain extent following mediatized – learned or inscribed – patterns; (7) although improvised memorials may often follow an aesthetic pattern influenced by the prevailing religion (e.g. Christianity), the phenomenon in itself need not be religiously based.

* * *

If these represent but a preliminary indication of an interesting dynamic phenomenon over the last few decades, which may well have different characteristics in other parts of the world, what happens to them over time? Although memorials are ephemeral – candles burn down and flowers wilt – other objects and messages have, depending on the climatic conditions, a longer life span. More and more this material culture is being incorporated into cultural heritage. Because of its relation to identity politics, more is being collected and preserved in museums or memorial centres as new forms of cultural production (Caffarena and Stiaccini 2005, Gardner and Henry 2002, Sánchez-Carretero 2006).

Spontaneous shrines and memorials have turned into major focuses at times of trauma, danger and social unrest. These shrines continuously manifest new and more dynamic ways of representing collective identity. Since they reveal the steps that shape national memories as human beings struggle to come to terms with traumatic loss, it is the undirected performative dimensions of these memorial sites that make them so fascinating. In the interest of developing a truly dynamic public anthropology, we challenge our colleagues to help make sense of these events as they occur. ●